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To: Friends of Democracy Corps

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Macomb and America's new political moment
*Learning from Obama-Trump working class voters in Macomb and
Democratic base groups in greater Detroit*

On the one-year anniversary of the Trump presidency, *Democracy Corps* traveled to Michigan to speak with the white working class Obama-Trump voters of Macomb County, the African American women of Detroit and the college educated women of suburban Southfield. Each, in their own way, had contributed to one of the most unlikely political outcomes in American history in 2016; and now, each is contributing to an unprecedented level of politicization, polarization and genuine fear for the future of the country. That is the consequence of the Trump election and the context as the country heads into the 2018 election.

This research comes a year after *Democracy Corps* and *The Roosevelt Institute* held [our first post-2016 focus groups in Macomb County](#). *Democracy Corps* and the *American Federation of Teachers* returned to Macomb to catch up with these Trump voters and Detroit-area base voters.¹

The stakes are so elevated in this political moment that both sides speak about a virtual “civil war” in the country, and critically, in their own families. Ordinary voters in focus groups now insist on talking about politics, national issues and the state of the country; they will not be distracted by our moderators who attempt to open conversations with popular culture and entertainment. Once participants realize they are in a room with fellow Trump or Clinton voters, they rush to politics. It sucks all the oxygen out of the room.

The anti-Trump voters are consolidated and motivated to resist the Trump presidency. They are seeking out tools and information to win arguments and maximize their engagement and are increasingly intent to vote. The college graduate women seemed as much a base, anti-Trump group as the African Americans. The latter said that they won't make the same mistake again, as the last election allowed so many racists to come out of the closet.

¹ *Democracy Corps* and the *American Federation of Teachers* conducted focus groups on March 7-8, 2018 with white working class Obama-Trump voters and Trump-Democrats in Macomb County, MI and African American women from Detroit, MI. *Democracy Corps* conducted a focus group with white college-graduate women in Southfield, MI on behalf of *The American Prospect* on March 9, 2018.

A healthy diet of *Fox News* is feeding the white working class men fending off the challenges of Trump's opponents, including those within their own families. They have taken a lot of heat from the millennials and children in their own families, but feel vindicated that a businessman like Trump has produced a strong macro-economy and kept his promises on immigration. They continue to appreciate how he speaks his mind, unlike a typical politician.

But the national drama has tested the resolve of the younger white working class 'Obama-Trump' women, especially those under 45 years old. They more openly express their concerns and doubts. They are primarily worried about rising health care costs, the quality of public education, safety from gun violence, and whether the president will sell out working people by going after entitlements.

From the white working class to African Americans to the college educated suburbs, voter consciousness is being shaped by the political pressure cooker set to explode in November.

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The politicized, polarized civil war

Voters across 'the resistance' and 'Trump world' use the same language to describe their feelings about the way things are going in the country. They are "terrified," "nervous," "depressed," and "distracted" because of the political climate, and that is compounded by their fear of gun violence.

They agree that things have reached an unacceptable level in our political discourse. "Politically and socially, it's the upheaval I don't like," began one older white working class woman, "I don't like all the fighting and bickering and violence and it just never used to be that way." Instead of having "empathy" or "finding a commonality" with people, a college graduate from Southfield complained, "everybody spends a majority of their time trying to find something wrong or different that they can exacerbate."

Trump voters complain that there is no respect for President Trump or for people like them who voted for him. One older white working class woman from Macomb recalled when she first started voting "there was so much respect for the president. And I don't care what he did, or what he said, there was always respect. It was always 'Mr. President.' And now, it disgusts me."

The civil war in the family

Many Trump supporters have paid a high price for their vote choice in their own families. One white working class man shared that he "lost contact with [his] own daughter because of the election." Others complain that their children and millennial friends challenge their views and suggest the media manipulates them.

A lot of the young kids – I call them young, they're in their 20s, you know, late 20s – I see them as Democrats, they don't support the President on [bringing change], so they're latching on to everything in the fake news, about what he's done, what he's said, you know? What he's ruined, you know? What Obama did that was great, you know? (White working class older woman, Macomb)

My girlfriend's little brother is ten years old and right away he is saying, "Oh, screw Trump." [...] it's like you don't even know anything about anything. It's like the mass media is brainwashing the younger generation and it's that serious. (White working class man, Macomb)

Families dividing over the 2016 election reflects just how central feelings about Trump have become to people's identities.

Trump's strengths with his voters

Trump voters now point to three of the main qualities about Trump that we identified last year. People like that he is "no-nonsense" and "doesn't sugarcoat" and they respect his "bravado against competition." (White working class men, Macomb) They believe that he is "a good business man" who is "making the economy good" and "bring[ing] jobs back to states." (White working class man and women, Macomb) They applaud him for being "patriotic" and say he cares "about making America great again." (White working class man, Macomb)

His toughness on immigration is also central to his appeal. "That's why I voted for him," one working class man said while describing what he liked about the President. Many of the women agree, emphasizing that he is tough on *illegal* immigration: "I think that what Trump is trying to do is good. Fix it so that there's not so many illegal [immigrants]. – That's the key word." (White working class woman, Macomb)

The majority of Trump voters, including all of the white working class men, says he is meeting their expectations. They point to evidence confirmed by developments or appeal to facts heard on *Fox News* to stand up to attacks.

When Trump got elected, over 180 companies actually came back to America. (White working class man, Macomb)

I think a lot of what's driving the economy is a lot of the regulations that Trump rolled back. Obama signed all kinds of regulations restricting businesses. And Trump has either loosened or eliminated a lot of those restrictions to allow businesses to expand. (White working class man, Macomb)

The resistance & Donald Trump

The college educated and African American women opposing Trump feel intensely about him as a person and his actions as president. Just read some of their comments when they were asked to write down their doubts about the President:

Racial divide, international tension, equal rights, illegal practices, gun control, money waster, women's rights, immigration issues, medical costs/healthcare, environment impacts, [un]trustworthy. (White college woman, Southfield)

He won't protect the middle class or poor. He doesn't think before speaks. His way of thinking will cause is to get in a war. He is racist. (African American woman, Detroit)

As long as Trump is in office this country will be divided more than any other President I'm aware of. (White college woman, Southfield)

War, racism, greed, ignorant, embarrassment. Not qualified!!!! (African American woman, Detroit)

For anti-Trump voters, "nothing good has happened" out of Donald Trump's election, except that the bigotry and racism that people "feel more free to express" now "fuels us as a people, not just as a race or a gender, to come together to speak on that and make a difference." (White college woman, Southfield, African American women, Detroit)

They end the evening offering these warnings to Donald Trump:

Dear President Trump, when you are on your deathbed please remember all the people hurt along the way.

African American woman, Detroit

We always hope and wish for a transparent government, and you have succeeded. We see what you thought we wouldn't!

White college woman, Southfield

Emerging issue: gun violence & family breakdown

These working class families seem particularly vulnerable to the kind of gun violence ubiquitous in the news. They talk about the breakdown of the traditional family in their communities and the decline of parental authority and worry explicitly about the impact on young men who they see as a risk to their own kids.

There is high anxiety about gun violence in these communities as these women increasingly worry about the risk to their own children and report gun threats in their own schools. These are no longer infrequent events, they are "day after day after day after day a new threat" so now they

have to teach “even the little ones” that “when you go to a movie theater, when you go to a mall, when you go to a concert, always watch your exit signs.” (White working class younger women, Macomb). One woman shared that her son begged to be homeschooled after there were multiple gun threats at his school in the same week.

We were most surprised by how clearly they connected “all these kids shooting and killing people” – young men, especially – to the “breakdown of families [where] the family unit is not like it used to be.” (White working class older women, Macomb). We had never heard this in focus groups before.

The women in the more college educated and upscale suburbs shared similar worries about violence. They worry that social media compounds the problem: “I think that social media kind of has a play in things where they make the criminals, like the mass shooters and stuff famous too much which makes some of them, may make some of them want to do it more because that's how they become famous and it may be why we have such a rise in all these mass casualty events in the past couple of years.” (White college woman, Southfield)

Voters across all the groups thought Republicans could do a much better job on the issue of gun violence.

It is still the economy, stupid!

The Obama-Trump voters of Macomb, African American women of Detroit and college graduate suburban women of Southfield all believe the economy is growing and more jobs are available.

I noticed [the economy was better] when people with little to no education was able to come in off the street and get a decent job or the temp services start offering more better job. Because it came to a point, even when you'd go to a temp service, you just could not get a job, and a lot of more people is working, a lot of more companies come into Michigan, opening up, so a lot more opportunities. (African American woman, Detroit)

They feel more secure and hopeful about the economy, but that has not diminished their frustration and insecurities about their stagnant pay in the face of rising costs.

This is an economy where wages don't go up and are dwarfed by the increase in costs for the items people rely on most – housing, childcare, education and most importantly, health care costs. In every focus group we hear more and more about the crippling cost of health care, especially among the women. They describe health care costs as “ridiculous” and “crappy” and something they increasingly cannot afford. (White working class women, Macomb)

I'm paying higher premiums and I'm paying more out of pocket for it. (White college woman, Southfield)

I pay a lot of money for insurance for me and my daughter, literally just basic insurance. And I – I barely – I don't think I've been sick in five years. I barely get a cold. So I mean like – and I barely make any money, and it's just me and my – my baby girl. And I'm talking about close to almost two something just for insurance – just basic insurance. And most of them have those high deductibles. (African American woman, Detroit)

Several participants in each group had medical debt, some so much that they could never hope to pay it back, and admitted they were dodging debt-collectors.

At the end of one group, three of the eight Trump voters beseeched him not to make matters worse.

The tax cut: “it *sounds* good”

The passage of the corporate and individual tax cut will not save the Party of Trump in 2018. In fact, the opposite will happen when opponents simply inform voters about features of the new tax law. The college educated, African American and white working class women offer some tepid endorsement of their own taxes being cut, but “think [Trump and Republicans are] exaggerating in how much [they are] wanting us to believe this is going to help the smaller people.” (White college woman, Southfield)

They suspect there are cards in a hand kept out of sight and in the end, the rich will be the big winners and the middle class will pay the price for this play. Just listen to this exchange among the African American women after hearing the President sell his tax cut in the State of the Union:

It sounds good, but we don't think it's going to happen.

There's more to it.

I'm thankful for it but I know I'm going to pay for it later.

Let's wait and see if you get a refund. Because somehow or another you're going to pay for it.

When it comes to the Trump voters, the tax cut is not the call to arms Trump and Republican congressional leaders hope it will be. The Trump voters are constantly looking for evidence that they cast the right vote, yet the tax cut barely came up when talking about good things about Trump. There are much bigger, more defining issues for Trump voters, like immigration.

When provided with positive information about the tax cut, voters expected they would see some of the benefit from the tax law as described.

The middle class will get more money. Granted, not a tremendous amount, but they will get more, which is better than getting less. (White working class older woman, Macomb)

The standardized deduction going up – that's real good. The \$1,000 he's saying extra we're going to get here – it's OK. (White working class older woman, Macomb)

They don't want to “look a gift horse in the mouth because it still savings,” but they insist “let's not make it more than it is.” (White working class older woman, Macomb) Really, they “expect a lot more.” (White working class man, Macomb) They began looking for the bad news:

I think just like with anything else, there's always pros and cons to every single bill or tax break or – there's always the good with the bad. So you have to figure out what's real good and what's real bad. (White working class older woman, Macomb)

I'm a little skeptical, [...] How is that going to pan out?” If you're getting more money in your paycheck, you're paying less in taxes. Is it going to even itself out by standardized deduction? And then, how are people going to be able to itemize? (White working class older woman, Macomb)

Those initial reactions to the tax cut hint at a deeper suspicion that will animate a powerful critique of Trump and Republicans.

Short-term binge by the rich that the middle class will pay for

Voters do not start the conversation about the tax cut with passionate views, but they end in a very different place with just a little information. Simply introducing a list of negative facts about the tax cut produced a powerful reaction among the African American, college graduate and younger white working class women. Many requested to take their copy home so they could use it to inform their neighbors and organize against it. In the hyper-polarized political environment Trump has created, this new information becomes fuel for the resistance, and many use their post-focus group postcards to Trump to challenge him about the tax cut. (*See appendix.*)

They do not contest any of the facts presented in the fact sheet, like the \$2.12 trillion price tag, the increase in the deficit, or whether Republicans plan to put entitlements and critical investments on the chopping block. They say “[the Republicans have] been talking about it for years” and they have seen how leaders have been all too willing to cut education funding over the past decade while prioritizing other things. (White working class younger woman, Macomb)

They begin to wonder, where is the snake in the grass? They know how much they may receive – a few thousand dollars, according to the Republicans – if they are lucky, and that doesn't square with the massive price tag and deficit increase.

I think that the difference is going to have to be made up at some point and it's going to come from the middle-class not from the .1 or .01 percent that just are retaining billions.

We're getting \$250. We're going to pay back those trillions back. (White college woman, Southfield)

The big deficit increase is a powerful symbol that something is wrong with this tax cut: if it is not paid, then it is stealing from their future and from their urgent needs today, like assistance with health care costs and better schools.

If they did cut [Medicare and Social Security] I think I would have to sue them because I paid into that. That's my money. (White working class younger woman, Macomb)

There's just a lot of negative things in it. Like to hear about them making cuts to Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security when the people who already receive those benefits are already struggling as it is. Especially our seniors. (White working class older woman, Macomb)

So we're talking about poor people who cannot afford healthcare to not be able to receive free healthcare, that's even scarier. (African American woman, Detroit)

How can you take away money from public schools, while hiring Betsy DeVos who wants to privatize our education system? How can you lie about taking away Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security? (White college woman, Southfield)

I mean [Trump] could give you like 2 or 3 thousand [dollars a year] but when we're paying 12 thousand a year for insurance, the 2 or 3 is nothing. It doesn't mean anything. It just doesn't make any difference to me. Unless you're going to put something into healthcare for me, I don't care. (White college woman, Southfield)

They are especially upset that a tax break goes to those same companies that are increasing costs. "I don't think the pharmaceutical companies need tax breaks," said one African American woman, "You make enough money [...]. So you really just robbing us for no reason just for fun, it's like a sick game or something."

They start to see their tax savings as "a façade" to "make it seem like [they did] something good" to cover up the fact that the rich and powerful "they're getting billions and billions" and in the end "they're really gonna screw you a little bit more." (African American women, Detroit) At the end of the groups, they accept this characterization of the tax cut:

This expensive tax cut that primarily benefits the top 1 percent adds trillions to the deficit and will be a time bomb for the middle class. It means Republican will slash Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid to pay for it, and mean less money for the things we need like investment in education and help with health care costs.

With this new information in hand, the anti-Trump voters were energized and ready for a fight and the white working class Obama-Trump women were demoralized, and several even peeled away from the president.

The tax bill defines what people hate about Trump and Republicans and their vision. If used to define the choice in the election, it will break badly against Trump and GOP.

Appendix: Post-focus group postcards to Donald Trump on the tax cut

Please keep in mind the consequences of what seems like good plans now for the Americans in the future. Think about the disabled, the children, and the elderly who rely on money being in funds for education, healthcare, and social security. Be honest, have character, present the good/bad so Americans can judge/vote accordingly. Who is this really benefitting?

-White working class younger woman, Macomb

Dear Mr. President,

The tax bill does not benefit the little guy. In the long seen we lose, you and your corporate cronies win big. If SS and Medicare take cuts over this- it will be a travesty. Keep your promises to the little people trying to stay afloat. Billionaires and major corp. have more than anyone could possibly need. You cannot take it with you when you die, let us live decently please.

-White working class older woman, Macomb

I don't agree with the new tax bill. The President needs to do the things that he promised. The bill seems to only benefit the wealthy, while making it harder for the working middle class and the poor to live.

-African American woman, Detroit

The new tax reform, I believe should be reformed. It's fair in some areas and unfair in other areas. I do not think that what I have paid in on SS should be in jeopardy. Furthermore I don't believe the tax cut for large corporations should be billions. If we amended these two in some way I do think we all will truly benefit in totality.

-White working class younger woman, Macomb

I do not feel as though you are worried about working families, less fortunate families, or small businesses. The people are not as blind as you believe they are and realize that you are doing more for corporations and big businesses. Please stop trying to cut funding for low income families and the elderly, as you claimed you would not do.

-White college woman, Southfield